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SUBJECT: MARONITE PATRIARCH FOR COMPROMISE PRESIDENT;
AGAINST CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT; WORRIED ABOUT PALESTINIANS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) In a 8/14 meeting with the Ambassador focused on Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir said that he opposes amending Lebanon's constitution -- a position that, if heeded by the MPs, would rule out LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's front-running presidential bid. Sfeir displayed mild annoyance that Sleiman had manipulated his visit to the Patriarch to project the appearance of Church support for his subsequent statements regarding a temporary, transitional government, an option Sfeir dislikes.

Insisting that parliament apply a two-thirds quorum requirement to presidential elections, Sfeir (please protect) said that he hoped a non-political, neutral candidate such as banker Joseph Torbey, ex-ambassador Simon Karam, or ex-minister Demianos Kattar (the latter of whom is not neutral, according to our analysis) would be elected. Nassib Lahoud is actually the best candidate, Sfeir revealed, but he saw Lahoud as unlikely to bridge Lebanon's political divide to get elected. Sfeir hinted that Michel Aoun is finished as a candidate. Sfeir also spent considerable time expressing worries about the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, fretting in particular that any international meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian issues will lead to de-facto "tawteen" (naturalization) of the refugees in Lebanon. This outcome, Sfeir emphasized, would "destroy" Lebanon, and he urged U.S. attention to Lebanon's needs and concerns regarding the Palestinians. End summary.

FRETTING ABOUT PALESTINIANS
AND MEANING OF U.S. CONFERENCE

12. (C) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, receiving the Ambassador in the Patriarch's summer residence in Diman on 8/14, focused the discussion initially on the issue of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. When asked by the Ambassador for his advice on how the USG can facilitate Lebanon's presidential elections, Sfeir went into an uncharacteristic lengthy monologue about how Lebanon will be destroyed by "tawteen," the alleged USG and Israeli plot to naturalize Lebanon's estimated 400,000 Palestinian refugee population. When questioned, he confirmed that he understood that the Ambassador asked about presidential elections, not the Palestinians. But he noted that "tawteen" will be an issue in presidential elections and a policy problem for the successful candidate.

13. (C) Assured by the Ambassador that the USG understands very well the sensitivity of the issue, the Patriarch nevertheless persisted for 20 minutes (out of 45). He said that "some people" have warned him of the danger of the U.S.-sponsored international meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian issues for later this autumn. This conference, he claimed, can easily lead to the de-facto naturalization of the Palestinians in Lebanon. The U.S. might not be intending to destroy Lebanon's confessional balance, the Patriarch conceded, but the U.S. needs to keep Lebanon's concerns in mind. He objected to the idea of rebuilding Nahr al-Barid refugee camp, without providing any tangible option for what to do with more than 30,000 displaced refugees who are now homeless. The Palestinians must be given incentives to leave Lebanon, he said.

OPPOSING CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS
AFFECTING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

14. (S) Moving at last to the presidential elections, Sfeir said that he opposed any constitutional amendments, whether regarding the constitutional six-year term of office or qualifications for candidacy. The Ambassador noted that the Patriarch's position thus would snuff out the immediate presidential ambitions of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, and Higher Judicial chief Antoine Kheir, all of whom seem to require a two-year, constitutionally mandated cooling-off period. Sfeir repeated his objections to any constitutional amendment. Asked if he specifically ruled out Sleiman's candidacy given the presumed front-runner status of Sleiman, Sfeir again repeated his objection to touching the constitution. He also said that Lebanon has "had enough" of military men.

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15. (S) But, as if giving an afterthought, Sfeir asked "what can I do" if "everyone" backs Sleiman. Asked what he thought of Sleiman, the Patriarch used his usual formula of citing unnamed third-party sources, noting that "they say" he's a good man before repeating his opposition to a constitutional amendment. The Ambassador encouraged him to make his opposition to a constitutional amendment clear. Shrugging, Sfeir said that "everyone knows my views, but they don't always listen."

ANNOYED THAT SLEIMAN WRAPPED HIS WORDS
IN PRESUMED PATRIARCHAL BLESSING

16. (S) The Ambassador asked if Sleiman, who had visited the Patriarch two days earlier, had shared his thinking about the possibility of some kind of transitional, temporary government that he would head (while retaining command of the LAF), if no consensus could be reached on the presidency. The Patriarch projected mild annoyance (which may have masked a more profound unhappiness, given his usual poker-faced demeanor), saying that Sleiman had talked only about the army and Nahr al-Barid. But by making presidential-sounding statements a day later, Sleiman made it appear as though "I agreed with him," the Patriarch complained, emphasizing that he did not support any solution except a normal, six-year presidency. "But what can I do," he said, if people exploit their connections to him. Sfeir said that he would publicly rebuke Sleiman, but he would continue to make it clear that he supports a president, not a temporary fix.

NASSIB LAHOUD BEST CANDIDATE,
BUT QUORUM REQUIREMENT ELIMINATES HIM

17. (S) The Ambassador asked Sfeir how he thought the presidency issue ultimately could be resolved. Saying that he was speaking "between you and me," Sfeir (please protect) said that he thought former MP Nassib Lahoud was the most

qualified and most statesman-like presidential candidate. But because of the two-thirds parliamentary quorum for presidential elections, "the others" (meaning the March 8-Aoun alliance) will withhold quorum to veto him. Sfeir would not entertain the idea of a simple majority quorum, saying that such a divisive, confrontational approach by the March 14 majority would be yet another one of those many dangers that could "destroy Lebanon." So Nassib Lahoud "has no possibilities." Justice Minister Charles Rizk is "good," but he will be blocked by Emile Lahoud's allies.

SEEKING A NON-PARTISAN PRESIDENT

18. (S) Thus, Sfeir said, he thought the only solution was a non-partisan candidate, someone "neither March 14 nor March 8." He should be a professional, experienced, neutral, and with credibility. Such a person could more easily heal the political divisions. The Ambassador noted that, in previous meetings, the Patriarch had distinguished between candidates, who he said could originate from March 14, and the actual president, who, once in office, needed to transcend the political divides. Shaking his head, Sfeir said that he now believed that, to be successful in overcoming the parliamentary quorum issue, the candidates themselves could not come from either party. Asked about Michel Aoun, Sfeir laughed without comment (a reaction we took to mean that he, like most others, considers Aoun, in the aftermath of losing the Maronite vote while winning the Metn elections, no longer a serious candidate).

19. (S) The Ambassador asked the Patriarch if he was therefore thinking of someone from the banking or business community. "Exactly," Sfeir responded. Prodded a bit, the Patriarch, asking that his choices not be revealed to other Lebanese (a request we will honor), gave three examples of the "profiles" he thought could be successful as candidates and president: Joseph Torbey, the newly elected head of the Maronite League (a political wing of the Church, the exact purpose of which no one -- not even the voluble former League head Michel Edde -- seems capable of explaining) and head of Credit-Libanais Bank; former Ambassador to Washington Simon Karam; and former Finance Minister (in Najib Mikati's 2005 cabinet) Demianos Kattar. The Ambassador, noting Kattar's business ties in Qatar with presidential son Emile Lahoud and Kattar's frequent visits to Lahoud in Baabda Palace. Sfeir shrugged: "they say he's good."

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110. (S) The Ambassador explained to Patriarch Sfeir that we wanted to support the presidential electoral process, but without getting involved in the selection of candidates. The Lebanese must choose the candidates, and the Lebanese parliament should elect the president. The Patriarch expressed skepticism that the U.S. would remain distant from the vetting of candidates ("they say you have favorites"), but he agreed that it was the best approach. Asked how the U.S. could build the environment for presidential elections, the Patriarch had no specific suggestions. "We must have elections," he said (although with less conviction than we would have liked).

COMMENT

111. (S) Getting the Patriarch to go public with his opposition to a constitutional amendment -- and thus eliminate LAF Commander Sleiman from the presidency in the process -- will be difficult. Always fearful about erosion in his authority, Sfeir is probably smarting from the experience of Christians battling it out in Metn elections despite the Patriarch's attempts to get the competing candidates to withdraw. With the LAF Commander the beneficiary of an enormous pro-LAF propaganda machine exploiting the Nahr al-Barid fight, Sleiman has eclipsed Aoun

as the most popular Maronite. We suspect that Sfeir's strong opposition to a constitutional amendment is in part his way to oppose Sleiman without going so obviously against the public mood. We wonder, however, if the Patriarch will maintain his opposition to a constitutional amendment. We will know soon enough: in early September, the Maronite bishops gather for their annual synod. All of Lebanon will be watching the synod's statement (more important than the monthly pronouncements) to check for clues to the Patriarch's thinking regarding the presidency. That is the opportunity for him to come out of the closet against a constitutional amendment.

¶12. (S) In terms of the "neutral" candidates Sfeir mentioned, should those three names actually be forwarded to parliament, Torbey -- smart, decent and pleasant, but dull, whose dinner parties so bore Lebanon's glitterati that they conclude by 10:30 p.m., an astonishingly early hour for Beirut -- would emerge as the winner by default. March 14 MPs will reject Kattar, whose fealty to Emile Lahoud now disgusts even Najib Mikati, who once included Kattar in his cabinet. Both March 14 and March 8 will reject Karam (who, should we have a vote, would be our pick of the three): Karam had the temerity to break with March 14 over the 2005 electoral deal with Hizballah, and he prefers third-way Shia to Hizballah and Amal, despite being from southern Lebanon. Torbey, whose bank is Saudi-owned, is a safe but uninspiring fall-back. If a Torbey presidency comes to pass, we expect our relations will be fine (although, frankly, we need to start taking the No-Doze in order to quiz Torbey about his heretofore unknown political views).

¶13. (S) But we wonder if the Patriarch is surrendering too soon. If he thinks Nassib Lahoud is the best candidate for Lebanon (as do we), shouldn't he be trying to see if that option is possible, before retreating to Torbey? If his opening position is someone as yawn-provoking as Torbey, then he could find himself forced back to someone who poses as a compromise but is actually pro-Syrian or pro-Hizballah. (Michel Sleiman again comes to mind.) We hope that the Vatican, the French, and others can help Sfeir at least start by aiming higher. Saudi Arabia, reportedly backing Nassib Lahoud, would normally be an ally, except that the Patriarch has been influenced by too many Sunni-bashing discussions with pro-Syrian and pro-Aoun forces. It is likely, in fact, that the pro-Syrians and Aounies have succeeded in planting suspicions in the Patriarch's mind that Nassib is "too Sunni" and "too Saudi."

¶14. (S) Certainly, it appears that the pro-Syrians -- no doubt aided in this campaign by Michel Edde, who is close to the Patriarch and who veers close to racism regarding the Palestinians -- have succeeded in poisoning the Patriarch's mind on the Palestinian issue. The "tawteen" or naturalization charges draw upon a deep paranoia embedded in the Lebanese psyche, and the pro-Syrians are using the fears of Christian marginalization to demonize us and minimize our partnership with the Lebanese. The Patriarch has into this trap. Whatever we do to advance the Israeli-Palestinian

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agenda, we should keep in mind the impact our statements and actions could have on the forces we are trying to promote in Lebanon.
FELTMAN